



The Wonderful Life and Strange Death of Walter Reuther

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Dirty Truths

by Michael Parenti

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THE WONDERFUL LIFE AND STRANGE DEATH OF WALTER REUTHER
(co-authored with Peggy Noton)

In recent decades, organized labor has endured a serious battering from conservative interests in both government and the corporate world. As progressives in the AFL-CIO try to rally their forces, they would do well to remember those few especially dedicated and gifted union leaders who understood the broader social and political dimensions of the labor struggle. Among such leaders looms the great figure of Walter Reuther. Rising from the ranks to spearhead the creation of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Reuther brought a special blend of unfaltering progressivism and efficacy to the U.S. political scene. For this he earned the wrath of powerful corporate and political interests. On the evening of May 9, 1970, Reuther, along with his wife,

The Early Struggle

Eight months before his death, Reuther reflected on the broader dimensions of labor's struggle: "The labor movement is about changing society What good is a dollar an hour more in wages if your neighborhood is burning down? What good is another week's vacation if the lake you used to go to, where you've got a cottage, is polluted and you can't swim in it and the kids can't play in it? What good is another \$100 pension if the world goes up in atomic smoke?" Reuther was the kind of labor leader who unsettled the higher circles: militant, incorruptible, and dedicated both to the rank-and-file and a broad class agenda.

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In 1958, at a GOP fundraiser, Senator Barry Goldwater declared that "Walter Reuther and the UAW-CIO are a more dangerous menace than . . . anything Soviet Russia might do to America."

... A two-page ad in the Wall Street Journal (9/22/58) ran an inch-high headline: "WILL YOU LET REUTHER GET AWAY WITH IT?" The ad warned: "Walter Reuther is already within reach of controlling your Congress. The American Labor movement has now become a political movement with the objective of establishing a socialist labor government in control of the economic and social life of this nation."

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Hoover's Vendetta

FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover certainly never lost his violent bitter taste, stalking Walter for some forty years, using undercover informants and illegal bugging equipment. Reuther was on friendly terms with several Democratic presidents who submitted his name for positions on presidential boards and commissions. In each instance, Hoover successfully blocked Reuther's appointment by secretly circulating disinformation packets to the White House and members of Congress, featuring the doctored "For a Soviet America" letter and testimony by individuals falsely accusing Walter of communist affiliations.

Both the CIA and the FBI monitored Reuther's foreign travel, taking note of public comments of his that "might be construed as contrary to the foreign policy of the United States?' During World War II, Hoover made preparations to put all three Reuther brothers in custodial detention. He was ultimately dissuaded from doing so by John Bugas, chief FBI agent in Detroit.

In his early Detroit days, Walter had formed an alliance with communists within the union in order to combat conservative labor factions and company bosses. In 1938 he severed this association and some years later, after gaining control of the UAW board, he launched a purge of dedicated UAW organizers who were communists or close to the party. In 1949, he played a key role in the expulsion of eleven unions accused of being communist-led.

Over the years, Reuther denounced communism at every opportunity, seeking thereby to legitimate his own status as a loyal American. Like so many on the Left then and now, he did not realize that those who fight for social change on behalf of the less-privileged elements of society are abhorred by conservative elites whether they be communists or not. For the industrialists, financiers, and leading politicians, it made little difference whether their wealth and power was challenged by "communist subversives" or "loyal Americans?' The communist label was used in attempts to smear and delegitimize Reuther. But it was not an obsession with communism that caused them to hate and fear Reuther but an obsession with maintaining their privileged place in the politico-economic status quo.

At the same time, Reuther was critical of right-wing radicalism. In 1961, Attorney General Robert Kennedy asked him, Victor, and Joseph Rauh, an attorney for the UAW, to investigate the ultra-Right. (Reuther was a close friend and advisor to the Kennedys.) The resulting report warned of radical right elements inside the military and urged the

president to dismiss generals and admirals who engaged in rightist political activities. The report also faulted J. Edgar Hoover for exaggerating "the domestic Communist menace at every turn" thus contributing "to the public's frame of mind upon which the radical right feeds."

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From the first days of the AFL-CIO merger in 1955, irreconcilable political differences existed between Reuther and AFL-CIO president George Meany, a cold-war hawk. Under Meany, the AFL-CIO entered into an unholy alliance with the CIA in order to bolster conservative, anticommunist unions in other countries. These unions, as Victor Reuther describes them, were run by people who were "well soaked with both U.S. corporate and CIA juices. It was, in effect, an exercise in trade union colonialism."

In early 1968 the UAW withdrew from the AFL-CIO and joined forces with the Teamsters and two smaller unions to form the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA), with a membership totaling over four million. The Teamsters gave Reuther a free hand on political and social issues. With Nixon in the White House and the bombings in Indochina escalating to unprecedented levels, Reuther ran ads in the national media and appeared before congressional committees to denounce the war and call for drastic cuts in the military budget. While the AFL-CIO was proclaiming its support for Nixon's escalation of the war and his anti-ballistic missile program, the ALA was lobbying hard against both.

Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and the killing of four students at Kent State University prompted Reuther-the day before his death-to send a telegram to the White House condemning the war, the invasion, and "the bankruptcy of our policy of force and violence in Vietnam?" By 1970, Reuther was seen more than ever as a threat to the dominant political agenda, earning him top place on Nixon's enemy list.

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The Fatal Crash: Some Disturbing Evidence

The struggles of Walter Reuther's life should cause us to give more than cursory attention to the questionable circumstances of his death. Here are some things to consider:

First, as president of the largest union in the country, Reuther had the resources for advancing his causes on the national scene as did few others. He was an extraordinarily effective proponent of socioeconomic equality and an outspoken critic of the military-industrial complex, the arms race, the CIA, the national security state, and the Vietnam war. For these, things he earned the enmity of people in high places.

Second, in the years before the fatal crash there had been assassination attempts against Walter and Victor. (Victor believes the attempt against him was intended as a message to Walter.) In each of these instances, state and federal law-enforcement agencies showed themselves at best lackadaisical in their investigative efforts, suggesting the possibility of official collusion or at least tolerance for the criminal deeds.

(In this context, it might be noted that in January 1970, only three months before the fatal plane crash, the Nixon White House requested Reuther's FBI file. The call came from Egil Krogh, a Nixon staff member who was later arrested as a Watergate burglar. The file documented Reuther's leadership role in progressive and antiwar organizations. In 1985,

when Detroit newsman William Gallagher asked why Nixon had wanted the file, Krogh was evasive, claiming a lack of memory.)

Third, like the suspicious near-crash that occurred the previous year, the fatal crash also involved a faulty altimeter in a small plane. It is a remarkable coincidence that Reuther would have been in two planes with the exact same malfunctioning in that brief time frame...

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In a follow-up interview with us, Victor further noted:

Animosity from government had been present for some time [before the fatal crash]. It was not only Walter's stand on Vietnam and Cambodia that angered Nixon, but also I had exposed some CIA elements inside labor, and this was also associated with Walter There is a fine line between the mob and the CIA There is a lot of crossover. Throughout the entire history of labor relations there is a sordid history of industry in league with Hoover and the mafia You need to check into right-wing corporate groups and their links to the national security system

Checking into such things is no easy task. The FBI still refuses to turn over nearly 200 pages of documents regarding Reuther's death, including the copious correspondence between field offices and Hoover. And many of the released documents-some of them forty years old-are totally inked out. It is hard to fathom what national security concern is involved or why the FBI and CIA still keep so many secrets about Walter Reuther's life and death.

Reuther's demise appears as part of a truncation of liberal and radical leadership that included the deaths of four national figures: President John Kennedy, Malcolm X Martin Luther King, and Senator Robert Kennedy, and dozens of leaders in the Black Panther Party and in various community organizations. Whether Reuther's death was part of a broader agenda to decapitate and demoralize the mass movements of that day, or whether such an agenda existed at all, are questions that go beyond the scope of our inquiry.

Suffice it to say that Victor's belief, shared by Walter's daughter Elizabeth Reuther Dickmeyer and other members of the family, that the crash was no accident sounds disturbingly plausible. Despite the limited investigation there is enough evidence to suggest that foul play was involved. The untimely death, of this dedicated and effective progressive labor leader raises disquieting questions about the criminal nature of state power in what purports to be a democracy.

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In C. Wright Mill's words: "What people are interested in is not always what is to their interest; the troubles they are aware of are not always the ones that beset them. . . It is not only that [people] can be unconscious of their situations; they are often falsely conscious of them."

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One can see instances of false consciousness all about us. There are people with legitimate grievances as employees, taxpayers, and consumers who direct their wrath against welfare mothers but not against corporate welfarism, against the inner city poor

not the outer city rich, against human services that are needed by the community rather than regressive tax systems that favor the affluent. They support defense budgets that fatten the militarists and their corporate contractors and dislike those who protest the pollution more than they dislike the polluters.

In their confusion they are ably assisted by conservative commentators and hate-talk mongers who provide ready-made explanations for their real problems, who attack victims instead of victimizers, denouncing feminists and minorities rather than sexists and racists, denouncing the poor-rather than the rapacious corporate rich who create poverty. So the poor are defined as "the poverty problem." The effects of the problem are taken as the problem itself. The victims of the problem are seen as the cause, while the perpetrators are depicted as innocent or even beneficial.

Does false consciousness exist? It certainly does and in mass marketed quantities. It is the mainstay of the conservative reactionism of the 1980s and 1990s. Without it, those at the top, who profess a devotion to our interests while serving themselves, would be in serious trouble indeed.

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